DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 157 350 EC 111 867

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TITLE A Remedial School in a Changing World.
PUB DATE Jun 78
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the World Congress on Future Special Education (First, Stirling, Scotland, June 25 - July 1, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; Emotionally Disturbed; *Foreign Countries; *Learning Disabilities; *Private Schools; Program Descriptions; *Remedial Programs; Special Schools
IDENTIFIERS *South Africa

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the educational system in South Africa, with emphasis on private remedial schools for the learning disabled student. The complexity of South Africa's pluralistic society is considered, characteristics of the learning disabled population are outlined, and the Norwood Remedial School's program for children with learning and emotional problems is described. (SBH)

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A REMEDIAL SCHOOL IN A CHANGING WORLD

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A REMEDIAL SCHOOL IN A CHANGING WORLD

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Freda Muller

I would like to preface my remarks by stating, at the outset that I am analysing the situation of "A Remedial School in A Changing World" in relation to the educational system in South Africa.

All societies are in a state of flux, but South African Society more so than elsewhere. The rate of change may be slow for some and too rapid for others, but undeniably we are in a stage of metamorphosis. What is different in our Society that is perhaps unique and has led to change and a need for change?

The Complexity of the Pluralistic Society:

There are two main white groups comprising about 4 million people divided into 2 language groups - English and Afrikaans. (There are also immigrant groups of Italians, Portuguese, German, Greek, etc., whose numbers are small in comparison to the main groups). Education is through the mother tongue (English or Afrikaans) and there are separate schools for the two language groups. Children who are not English or Afrikaans speaking are educated in one or other of the two official languages. People of mixed black and white descent comprise about 2 million, speaking both official languages with a predominance of Afrikaans. Asians comprise six hundred thousand and the Black population comprise 18 million, divided into 10 ethnic groups and speaking 7 different languages. Each race group has its own language and school system controlled by different departments of Education, e.g. White, Black, Indian, Coloured.

I should like to give a brief outline of the system of education in South Africa pertaining to white, urban children who are English speaking.

Compulsory formal schooling begins at the age of 6 years in Grade 1 and continues at the Primary level to Std. 5 (age 12). High school encompasses scholars from Std. 5 (12 years) to the matriculation level (17 years) or within a differentiated syllabus prepares the

non-matriculant for more practical type of education in the 'practical classes'. I am concerned here only with the primary level of education.

There is a prescribed syllabus laid down as a guideline by the Department of Education in relation to each subject taught. This leads to a tendency amongst teachers who are not innovative to cling to the prescribed syllabus rather than expand the horizons of the child. In spite of this, the children do acquire a good fundamental education that enables them to cope adequately and successfully when they leave South Africa and enter schools in the United Kingdom, United States and Canada. This has been our experience of those families who have emmigrated within the past 5 years.

The size of the classes varies from 20 to 40 and more pupils per teacher, and at primary level all subjects are generally taught by the same teacher, including the second language, Afrikaans, which is required for merit promotion.

The Learning Disabled Population:

Incidence:

The incidence of children with learning problems (defined as Minimal Cerebral Dysfunction) in the primary schools was reported by the Murray Departmental Commission of Enquiry (1969) to be 15%.

Facilities:

1. Provincial (Transvaal)

   The facilities set up by the Department of Education in the 4 provinces in South Africa differ in many ways in respect of the Learning Disabled scholar.

   I shall deal here only with the province of the Transvaal, where our school is geographically situated.

   The Murray Commission of Enquiry delineated 3 categories of pupils:

   Category A:

   Those children with minimal problems who could be helped by the provision of specialist services within the school system (such as resource rooms).

Category B:

Those children with more serious and diverse problems who would benefit from one or more years of special help in a remedial school.

Category C:

Those children whose problems and educational lags are such that they need to be in a remedial school for the whole of their primary schooling.

It is for those children in Category B - those who require help for a limited time - that the Transvaal Department of Education has created a service. This service is in the form of School Clinics for diagnosis and remediation and the establishment of aid classes (self-contained classes) within the public school system. These classes admit scholars from Grade 1 to Std. 1. The child may spend two years in an aid class and if he fails to gain a merit promotion at the end of this time, placement in a special school is recommended.

Special education in South Africa does not encompass the Learning Disabled but serves the mentally and physically handicapped, the sensorially impaired, and the cerebral palsied children. The Cerebral Palsied Schools, in an attempt to offer a service to the Learning Disabled Children, have set up self-contained classes for the Learning Disabled Child.

The desirability of an environment where the emphasis is on the physically and mentally handicapped child for the Learning Disabled Child is, in my opinion, highly questionable.

Norwood Remedial School:

It is within the framework of this system that private schools, such as Norwood Remedial School, have been founded and function.

The private schools are precluded from Government or Provincial subsidy and have, therefore, to rely on their own resources and public benefactors for funding.

Our own school admits children with both learning and emotional problems, whether

these are primary or secondary. In other respects we are in line with the current thinking in the United States' proposed rulemaking in that we do not admit children who are mentally retarded, sensorially impaired, physically handicapped or psychotic. Whilst controversy about mainstreaming in education as opposed to separate and perhaps more specialised facilities rages all around us, it is my conviction, borne out of my experience, that the classification of the Murray Commission, defining as it does different levels of need and different ways of meeting these needs, is both practical and commendable.

By the provision of a diagnostic unit, a full-time schooling facility and a part-time adjunctive unit, Norwood Remedial School is, in a sense, catering for all 3 categories. The difference is, that the child with minimum problems who needs adjunctive help, is getting this at our school instead of within a resource-room type facility at his own school. He nevertheless remains in the mainstream of education.

1. Children are admitted into the full-time school for a period of one or more years during which time they are helped to overcome their problems so that they can then return to the mainstream.
2. Children may remain at our school to complete their primary schooling.
3. Pupils may receive adjunctive help.

Our approach differs from that of the aid class in that we have a team approach and the members of the team contribute their own specialised skills in their specific areas of training, such as Remedial teachers, Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists and Clinical Psychologists. A team approach implies a system of working together based on shared decisions, direct communication and free interaction. It is essentially a child-orientated approach, within a psychotherapeutic environment created by the attitudes of the people within its walls.

I believe strongly that the quality of the environment and the relationships between staff and children accounts for a considerable proportion of our success rate.

Figures for those children who have overcome their learning problems and were both academically and emotionally able to integrate back into regular school are:

1972 - 92%

1973 - 69%

1974 - 70%

1975 - 63%

1976 - 63%

These figures are indicative of the response of the child to specialised help from a team of highly trained and sensitive staff.

I would like to mention that a problem we face is that our children who are educated in their home language, English, have also to gain a merit promotion pass in the second official language, Afrikaans..

Our pupils must follow the same syllabus as the pupils in the mainstream of education in that it is our goal for the child to re-enter that stream in the shortest possible time.

We therefore teach the syllabus but our teaching methods differ. I need not emphasise the all-too familiar problem facing special educators in a bilingual country where children who are learning-disabled, have to learn to read, write and speak a second language before they are proficient in the mother tongue. This is a very serious problem in a child with a language problem, or one who is linguistically handicapped. Such a child will have to spend longer with us or be promoted at the discretion of the School Principal in spite of failure to gain a pass mark in the second language.

Methodology:

I cannot speak of results without touching on the subject of the methods we use to attain them.

We have learned much from special educators both in the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Our own philosophy is broadly in line with the current evaluation and prescriptive teaching methods evolved by Johnson and Mykelbust at Northwestern University, whilst at the same time we adopt an essentially eclectic and pragmatic approach. ("If it works, use it"). There is not sufficient time to pay tribute to all those who have contributed to our own body of knowledge.

We remain in touch with the world of special education through study visits abroad, the international body of literature, through our own growing experience and through research carried out at our school by the students of two local English language Universities.

The need for the establishment of more remedial schools in the country is substantiated by the following:

Social and Environmental Change:

Education: has become and continues to become more complex.

Technological developments continue to make ever-increasing demands at the level of High School and University levels.

In specialised fields the growing body of knowledge makes it increasingly difficult to acquire a broad education but rather education for (as Reich calls them) 'THE SPECIALISTS'. Our lives, he says, are controlled by Specialists. The Specialists not only are required to spend more and more time in study, but cannot keep pace with world literature and research. It is said, that a Ph.D. in the sciences is now outdated after 3 years.

Increasing educational goals lead to a higher level of expectation and ever rising educational levels. This leads to even greater demands on the learning disabled child. These children we know are of normal intelligence and are often of superior intelligence. It is not sufficient that they become literate and numerate, but they are now faced with greater challenge at every level of their education.

The competitiveness of the educational environment is thus creating more and more underachievers, and in this sense they need more and more help.

Educational achievement amongst affluent white South Africans is given first priority in the lives of their children. This is often at the expense of social and emotional growth and stability.

The reason for this unhealthy aspiration is probably reflected in the dual nature of our complex multi-racial society and attempts to maintain the status quo.

It leads, conversely, to a high drop-out rate at University level as many students who enter University are not academically capable and are not motivated in that they are fulfilling parental aspirations rather than their own needs. Whereas in other advanced societies, the need for technical education is assuming priority and many graduates are not able to find employment, there exists in South Africa the need to further entrench white achievement. Thus such parents are more aware of success and failure in their children and a child who is educationally backward presents a very real threat to the family. This is another reason for an ever-increasing demand for remedial services.

Social and Medical Factors:

From birth, the white child from the affluent society inherits his privileges. His birth is in a hospital and his delivery usually by an obstetrician rather than the village midwife. Medical training is excellent so that with a low infant mortality

rate, the excellence of pre and ante-natal care, more 'at risk' babies survive and feature strongly in our case histories of Learning Disabled Children admitted to our school.

We (the white sector) are, as Alan Drury described us, "A Very Strange Society". We have a very high standard of living; we also have one of the world's highest rates of divorce, alcoholism, suicide, coronorary thrombosis and mental illness.

Thus our incidence of Learning Disabled Children is high, many of them having primary emotional disturbances and secondary learning problems. Again our case studies reveal an abnormally high level of family problems and social problems.

A factor that cannot be overlooked is the rising level of anxiety in both child and adult society as we strive to resolve our social-political problems. The anxiety levels in society are again reflected in the high incidence of under-achievers seeking help.

Conclusion

"Each generation gives new form to the aspirations that shape education in its time". (Brunner).

We, in our country, as educators, are beset by special problems and the role of the educator assumes greater importance in the context of these problems.

The Learning Disabled Child in our population is not excluded from these problems and often is a result of societies' inability to come to terms with itself. We have a higher incidence of Learning Disabled Children. They need to be educated, but as every child, they need to be educated not only for skills but to be sensitive to the needs of others and to create a society where the emphasis is on human values.

"And now we stand at the crossroads, in education as in the wider issues facing our country. No one who is sensitive to what has happened in South Africa in the past two years and has been realistic in appraising its implications, can fail to appreciate

that things will never be the same again, that whether we like it or not, change has come to stay, that it will be endemic". (Hartshorne).

Thus the educator must equip the child to meet change, to foster change and to live in harmony in a changed and changing society.

Change is threatening, but in the nature of our society it is inevitable and desirable.

The goals of education must embrace academic competency and human values.

Our survival and our happiness may well depend upon the degree of success with which we accomplish both these goals.

S U M M A R Y

A REMEDIAL SCHOOL IN A CHANGING WORLD

The concept of a Remedial School is discussed in relation to the educational system in South Africa. Unique factors in the society have led to a need for change.

The system of education and the role of a private remedial school is discussed.

Incidence, criteria for admission and the type of services rendered are analysed.

The need for the establishment of more such schools is examined in terms of social and political change in the society.

Factors seen to result in an increasing need for remedial services are reviewed.

The goals of the Special Educator are seen to approximate all educationists.

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